

Power Differential

Contributed by John F. Macek LCSW

Personnel often have mixed feelings toward HR, mostly because of the dual role HR professionals must play. It is inescapable that recommendations by HR will impact the livelihood and quality of life of others. That goes with the territory and is an exercise of power regardless the intent of HR professionals.

HR professionals have an interface with management that gives them a power differential within their organization. They do salary surveys, recommend salary ranges, make recommendations on benefit packages, and advise managers on disciplinary matters. These functions impact quality of life of many people.

HR professionals walk a tight rope. They help deserving employees achieve position upgrades. At the same time, if one of these employees were to violate company interests, the HR professional would have to shift from a helper to disciplinarian. Managers often turn to HR professionals to think through disciplinary action. Usually the manager already has a strong leaning and seeking support from HR to support their leaning. The HR professional may or may not agree with the manager's approach. That means they may need at times to gingerly redirect the manager's thinking. The HR professional's specialized knowledge constitutes a power differential with that manager. The HR professional has an even greater power differential with personnel because the advice they give can spell the difference between an employee's retention or termination. These are heavy responsibilities.

Many times underperforming employees are struggling with personal issues that impact their performance. EAP may or may not be able to salvage the situation. At some point, a decision must be made whether compassion is a solution or termination is necessary. Our responsibility as professionals is to do what we can to help individuals but we are also bound to protect the best interests of the organization, which means more than profit margin but the job stability of all employees that could be impacted if the organization flounders.

These are always painful dilemmas. Early in my career I faced such a dilemma when a best good friend from college applied for a department head position. He asked me for a letter of recommendation. He had good skills and performed well until disaster struck. One day, he and his six-year-old son were returning home from a trip. A drunk driver came over the hill in the wrong lane. His son was killed on impact. He was in critical condition for weeks with multiple wounds. Everyone liked him and felt for him, but his depression was taking a great toll on his performance as a department manager. .

I tried my best to help him, but his grief was too great. The manager to whom he reported felt badly for him, but was in a quandary. Compassion alone was not going to bring back a deteriorating department. His manager, a mutual friend, cornered me one day asking for guidance. He did not wish to do my friend harm, but could not allow the department to disintegrate further. The manager decided he had no other choice than to remove my friend from his position. He asked my friend for his resignation and gave him ample time to find a position in which he could function, which fortunately happened. When my friend learned that his manager had consulted with me, he felt I had betrayed him. He refused any further contact with me. Years later I encountered him and could still see his pain. The experience was something I would never want to go through again.

I share this painful story because I know readers of this article are experiencing similarly difficult calls. There is no way of avoiding the pain, but as professionals we must do what we must. We cannot allow compassion to take precedence over the good of an entire company and its personnel.

These are the difficult situations for which there are no good answers. The decisions we must make leave us torn and in personal distress.

Over time, I found a way of dealing with my distress. I call it the mirror test. Every morning when I look into the mirror, I must be able to respect the person I see. I have to know I had acted ethically and gave my best effort to doing what was right. That's what being a professional is all about.

John F. Macek, a management coach, has been in management for over 30 years, 17 as a CEO. He writes short-format training material that he publishes through BOSSHANDBOOKS (www.bosshandbooks.com).